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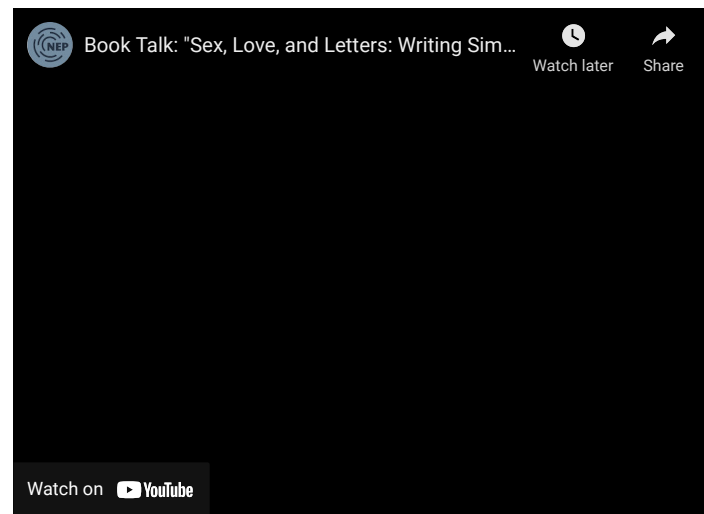
IHS Book Talk: "Sex, Love, and Letters: Writing Simone de Beauvoir" by Judith G. Coffin, University of Texas at Austin (History Faculty New Book Talk)



The History Faculty New Book Series presents:

Sex, Love, and Letters: Writing Simone de Beauvoir
(Cornell University Press, 2020)

A book talk and discussion with
Judith G. Coffin
Associate Professor of History
The University of Texas at Austin
<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/history/faculty/jcoffin>



With discussants:

Indrani Chatterjee

Professor of History, The University of Texas at Austin

<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/history/faculty/ic2396>

and

Yoav Di-Capua

Professor of History, The University of Texas at Austin

<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/history/faculty/yd386>

When Judith G. Coffin discovered a virtually unexplored treasure trove of letters to Simone de Beauvoir from her international readers, it inspired her to explore the intimate bond between the famed author and her reading public. This correspondence, at the heart of *Sex, Love, and Letters*, immerses us in the tumultuous decades from the late 1940s to the 1970s— from the painful aftermath of World War Two to the horror and shame of French colonial brutality in Algeria through the dilemmas and exhilarations of the early gay liberation and feminist movements. It also provides a glimpse into the power of reading and the power of readers to seduce the authors of their favorite books.

The relationship between Beauvoir and her audience proved especially long, intimate, and vexed. Dr. Coffin traces this relationship, from the publication of Beauvoir's acclaimed *The Second Sex* to the release of the last volume of her memoirs, offering an unfamiliar perspective on one of the most magnetic and polarizing philosophers of the twentieth century. Along the way, we meet many of the greatest writers of her generation—Hannah Arendt; Dominique Aury, author of *The Story of O*; François Mauriac, winner of the Nobel Prize and nemesis of Camus; Betty Friedan; and, of course, Sartre—bringing the electrically charged salon experience to life.

Sex, Love, and Letters lays bare the private lives and political emotions of the letter writers and of Beauvoir herself. Her readers did not simply pen fan letters but, as Dr. Coffin shows, engaged in a dialogue that revealed intellectual and literary life to be a joint and collaborative production. "This must happen to you often, doesn't it?" wrote one. "That people write to you and tell you about their lives?"

See the Not Even Past story on the book [here](#).

- "[Coffin] writes engagingly about... historic developments while paying strict attention to the vivid immediacy of those letters that range far and wide across the categories of sentiment, education, and motive, revealing personalities that run the gamut from the elegant to the crude, the appreciative to the demanding."
—*Boston Review*
- "Coffin opens up a new perspective onto a major writer, and makes a convincing case for her continuing intellectual relevance."
—*Publisher's Weekly*
- "This beautifully written, frequently moving book is a crucial addition to the scholarship on Simone de Beauvoir."
—*Kirkus Reviews*
- "Beauvoir has often been either unduly attacked or zealously defended by biographers and critics. Coffin gets beyond this impasse, neither apologizing for her subject's limitations, nor reproducing the biased standards by which contemporaries and historians often judge women. Those who read bestsellers by Tony Judt or Rebecca Traister will enjoy *Sex, Love, and Letters*."
—Sharon Marcus, author of *The Drama of Celebrity*
- "Coffin's book is a signal achievement in the history of reading and literary history writ large. Her sensitive and astute use of the unexplored letters written to Simone de Beauvoir gives us a truer sense than we've ever had of this writer's central role in postwar culture."
—Alice Kaplan, author of *Looking for The Stranger*
- "A delightful analysis of a little-known aspect of Beauvoir's life and legacy: the extraordinary epistolary relationships with her readers. Coffin shares intriguing insights into the highly personal and concrete ways that Beauvoir moved and inspired generations of women and men."
—Skye Cleary, author of *Existentialism and Romantic Love*
- "A highly original, exciting contribution to the cultural history of the postwar period, *Sex, Love, and Letters* offers a nuanced, beautifully detailed portrait of Beauvoir's readership, her 'intimate public.' Coffin's book sheds vivid new light on the preoccupations of an entire era."
—Emma Kuby, author of *Political Survivors*



See Professor Coffin's book featured in [The Guardian](#) ("Intimate letters reveal Simone de Beauvoir's role as an agony aunt"), and in the [Boston Review](#) ("The Obligation of Self-Discovery").

Dr. Coffin is Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of [The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915](#) (Princeton University Press) and co-author of four editions of *Western Civilizations* (W.W. Norton). She has authored numerous articles on radio, mass culture, and sexuality. She is currently at work on two projects, "A Short Biography of Story of O: the Postwar Politics of Sexuality and Eros" and "The Adventure of the Interior: Radio and Psychoanalysis in Postwar France." Follow her on Twitter [@judygcoffin](#).

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